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Cloth, gender, politics: the Armagh Handkerchief, 1976

Le mouchoir d'Armagh. Tissu, genre et politique. Irlande du Nord, 1976

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Cloth, gender, politics: the Armagh Handkerchief, 1976

Louise PURBRICK

In the centre of a large white cotton handkerchief, a gun lays over a flag (fig. 1). The gun is an AK47, the flag an Irish tricolour. Both are composed of even blocks of colour created by felt tip pens. Above, an unfurled banner outlined in black felt tip announces "'A' Company" and the date "1976" (fig. 2). The date is divided in half, written on a flourish of fabric at each banner's end. "ARMAGH JAIL", stencilled in orange above the banner and below the strap of the gun, completes the handkerchief's centrepiece: it is surrounded by names. Forty-five women have signed in Biro ballpoint pen. Most have added a neighbourhood and a number of years under or after their names; many draw a line under these details of their life. Along the bottom hem is a dedication: "TO GEORDIE & BERNADETTE, FROM CHRISTINE ARMAGH JAIL 1976."

The handkerchief can be easily recognised as a politicized and gendered object. A cursory glance reveals the iconography of a national armed struggle and the multiple marks of female biographies. That quick look might also capture some of the contradictions of material form. The light fabric is weighed down with significance, with all those names: Angela, Anne, Brenda, Dolours, Eíbhlín, Eileen, Evelyn, Geraldine, Jackie, Jane, Josephine, Kate, Maíread, Maria, Madeline, Margaret, Marion, Maríe, Mary, Milly, Nuala, Patricia, Pauline, Philomena, Rita, Rosie, Sheila, Susan. Lines of similar width and colour formed these individual names, indicating they wrote with the same pen. Biros are ubiquitous, but this one was passed from hand to hand. Its point was pressed upon a common cloth, a simple square of plain white cotton. Felt tip pens are common, too; they are a cheap, quick, standardized means of creating

contrasting colour. The Armagh handkerchief is both mass-produced and it is handmade; it is resolutely ordinary and absolutely unique. It is full of material, historical and apparent contradictions, only one of which is the juxtaposition of women and violence, the female names that encircle an automatic assault rifle.

This article is about the meanings of the Armagh handkerchief. It reflects upon its contradictions, how, in particular, its fragile materiality can contain such political force. As an art and design historian, I attend to the material form, to how the details of an image or object may be rendered with specific techniques and through a particular medium. In attending to the material, I borrow anthropological ways of thinking; I try to "think with" material culture. This is to attempt to understand material as already cultural. A particular material form not only represents a category, such as gender, constituted elsewhere, in some higher immaterial place; it does the work of categorization: material forms are cultural categories.[1] Since my focus is material, my historical source is the handkerchief itself. Its materiality is both physical and historical; there are specific conditions of its existence. It was decorated and circulated in a particular time and place. The material form of the handkerchief needs to be explained by its conditions of production, how it was made by women imprisoned in Armagh during the conflict "in and about" Northern Ireland.[2] It is part of a wider material culture of conflict that I have come to understand through working with former political prisoners and within conflict resolution groups.[3] Thus the analysis of the Armagh handkerchief offered here is an examination of how its gendered political properties are constituted by its material form. The Armagh handkerchief is, however, a borrowed form. It was not the first of its kind.

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1 Douglas & Isherwood 1996; Holbraad, Wastell & Henare 2007.

2 The phrase "in and about" Northern Ireland is used by Healing Through Remembering (http://www.healingthroughremembering.org) and adopted here to acknowledge that the status of Northern Ireland is contested.

3 Purbrick 2006 and 2007.

Another handkerchief

A silk handkerchief made by one imprisoned woman and signed by many others is included among the 106 illustrations in Rozsika Parker's, *The Subversive Stitch*[4] (fig. 3). Its centrepiece is a posy of embroidered appliquéd flowers; purple violets encircle an embroidered script and signature: "Worked in Holloway Prison by Jane Terrero." Around the petals, leaves and stems, Jane Terrero stitched an account of her imprisonment: "Arrested March 1st 1912/Sentenced by Judge Lawrie on Wednesday March 27th to four months." The icon and emblems of the suffragette movement provide the title and frame for the flowers and their maker. At the top are the initials of the Women's Social and Political Union, W.S.P.U., their motto, "Deeds not Words". Fixed along the bottom of the handkerchief's border, a purple white and green ribbon, is a postcard portrait of WSPU leaders, Emmeline and Christobel Pankhurst. Between border and centrepiece are two columns of names of the suffragette prisoners who participated in hunger strikes and "were fed by force." Their signatures, Rozsika Parker suggests, brought together "the tradition of political petition and protest with a female social tradition by which guests would embroider their signatures for their hostess to commemorate a visit."[5] Parker draws attention to the dualities of their embroidery upon the handkerchief; she argues that suffrage stitchery was a dialogue between subjugation and resistance. Thus, to embroider was to employ the sign of the "supposed weaker sex" to celebrate its strength.[6] Indeed, Jane Terrero's commemoration of feminine resistance to authority was articulated in a particular feminine form: the act of smashing windows was represented in small stitched hammers; the arrows of prison dress and the bars of prison architecture are shown in similar fashion.

Maureen Daly Goggin's recent account of Jane Terrero's Holloway handkerchief notes that it can be read as political protest, art object, and historical record. But she analyses it as an "identity performance", a material "fabrication" of self.[7] Terrero's stitching of

4 Parker 2012: 192-193. Initially published in 1984.

5 Parker 2012: 200.

6 Parker 2012: 201.

7 Daly Goggin 2009: 17.

the handkerchief's centrepiece, an example of "fancywork", constituted her as middle-class and feminine,[8] but the fabric itself had already done some of this performative work for her. Daly Goggin points to histories of the handkerchief that have identified the femininity of the fabric: it is both "an extension of the self" and "the mark of a lady".[9] Importantly, Daly Goggin recognises that the handkerchief is already a cloth of some significance. Embroidery is a seductive material source for understanding the meaning of handkerchiefs decorated by imprisoned women because, as Parker implies, it holds together experiences of repression and autonomy.[10] The repetitious act of pulling a threaded needle through a piece of cloth allows stitchers to recede into their own interior worlds. Embroidery, therefore, is an analogy for incarceration and domesticity, imprisonment and femininity. But the analogy applies only to the Holloway handkerchief and not to the one made in Armagh. The latter was not embroidered. It is coloured not stitched. Patterns created with a felt tip pen are a modern adaption of older techniques of decoration, the residue of which is evident in the formal design: an emblematic centrepiece, surrounded by epigraphic forms. The different techniques of decoration, the creation of lines rather than stitches, the substitution of pen for needle, ink for thread, is a disruption of a material practice. Moreover, there is no unbroken tradition of jailed women's handkerchief making; no direct line of descent can be drawn from Holloway to Armagh. The Armagh piece is less obviously feminine; it is not made of silk: the large, white cotton square is a man's handkerchief. Its forms derived from practices of decoration developed through periods of political imprisonment and performed, for the most part, by men.[11] Cloth, however, remains materially feminine.

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8 Daly Goggin 2009: 23.

9 Daly Goggin 2009: 20. She quotes from GUSTAFSON 2002 and SCHWAB 1957.

10 Parker 2012: 10.

11 The relationship between some English suffragettes and Irish nationalists should be noted here; moreover at least two of the female signatories, Dolours and Marion Price, had been held in Britain.

Historical conditions

The Armagh handkerchief is one of hundreds of handkerchiefs decorated by republican and loyalist prisoners between the years 1971 and 1976.[12] The overwhelming majority of these were made by republican men; they were the largest group of prisoners when the prison population was at its height in the early 1970s (fig. 4 & 5). Handkerchief decoration was widely practised in the early years of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

The conflict, euphemistically described as "The Troubles", lasted approximately thirty years, from 1969 to 1998, that is, from the deployment of the British Army in Belfast and Derry to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. This periodization is contested, especially the endpoint of the conflict, since the process of conflict-resolution is far from finished. Indeed, there remains "a conflict about what the conflict is about."[13] A series of "multiple disagreements" can be divided into interpretations of the conflict as ethno-national, and those that regard it as colonial in nature.[14] Currently, ethno-national interpretations that posit differences of culture and identity between two communities (loyalists, unionists and protestants on the one hand, republicans, nationalists and catholics on the other) as the cause of conflict are dominant in most political and public arenas, not least because the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which instituted the present power-sharing or "consociational" arrangements for Northern Ireland's internal government, attempts a balance between the opposing demands and desires of the two traditions.[15] Colonial interpretations seek to reinstate the history of British intervention in Ireland, emphasizing the maintenance of Northern Ireland within the British state as a limited theatre of war between those seeking Irish independence (nationalists and republicans) and British forces. Importantly, the interpretation of the conflict is not only a matter of academic debate

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12 Some handkerchief decoration extends beyond 1976, often practised by remand prisoners.

13 McGarry & O'Leary 1996: 1-2.

14 McGarry & O'Leary 1996: 5; Tonge 2006: 12-15.

15 Tonge 2006: 26-29.

but manifested through its material culture. It is cast as colonial in and through the republican handkerchiefs, whose makers articulated their imprisonment as an act of British repression (fig. 6).

Notwithstanding its opposing interpretations and unsettled ending, there is some agreement about how the conflict developed through three phases: reactive containment, criminalization, normalization or managerialism.[16] Each of the three phases was defined by a different penal regime and the strategies of each regime altered the material conditions of prisoners and their material practices, such as decorating handkerchiefs.[17] This article is focussed upon the period of reactive containment (1969 to 1976) that Peter Shirlow and Kieran McEvoy have described as "characterized by the state's need to react to the outbreak of political violence." They pithily summarize this phase, as "getting the enemy off the streets." Prisons, including Armagh women's jail, were "one element in an overall counter insurgency strategy."[18] Imprisonment served as a punishment for opposition to British rule and Unionist control over Northern Ireland, but its primary objective was to contain it. Holding people as internees or sentenced prisoners removed them from the theatre of conflict into camps, jails, and ships that were subject to "military security",[19] including British Army perimeter controls. Their overtly repressive function reflected the political, even prisoner-of-war, status of the prisons and prisoners. The drive to contain conflict through internment was initially brought "in"[20] by the Stormont Parliament in 1971 and continued with British Direct Rule, which began the following year. Internment, imprisonment without charge or trial, was sectarian. Of the 2,169 people interned, only 109 were not from the catholic-nationalist communities from which republican groups derived their support. Internment demonstrated the continuity of state sectarianism between devolved Unionist and direct

16 See development of these definitions in Gormally, McEvoy & Wall 1993; Shirlow & McEvoy 2008: 26-32.

17 Brown 2008: 28.

18 Shirlow & McEvoy 2008: 26-27.

19 Corcoran 2006: 19.

20 The phrase used by catholic-nationalists. See Fairweather, McDonagh & McFadyean 1984: 197.

British government, which the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had organized to oppose. It was their march against internment on Sunday 30 January 1972 that became known as Bloody Sunday, after the Parachute Regiment of the British Army opened fire on the crowd and killed fourteen unarmed civilians.

In internment camps, such as Long Kesh, internees were held alongside sentenced prisoners and subject to the same conditions. Following a 35-day hunger strike by republican male prisoners in Crumlin Road Gaol, Northern Ireland Secretary William Whitelaw conceded in June 1972 a special category for politically motivated prisoners, those who had been sentenced for conflict-related offences. Prisoners "on special category" did not have to wear a uniform or undertake work, and could receive more letters, parcels and visits than "ordinary" prisoners. It was regarded as equivalent to political status, because such prisoners had more or less the same rights as those who were remanded or interned; that is, they too were treated as if they had not in fact been convicted.

The prison population escalated in the period of reactive containment, not only due to internment, which was phased out by 1975, but through an expedited and politicized sentencing process contained in the Emergency Provisions Act (Northern Ireland) of 1973.[21] The Act proscribed certain organizations and announced: "A trial on indictment of scheduled offences shall be conducted by the court without a jury."[22] These no-jury courts, which came to be named after Lord Diplock, who chaired the commission that recommended them, also allowed convictions on uncorroborated confessions. Women did not escape such sentencing. Mary Corcoran estimates that "1,000 or so" women of the almost 4,000 that passed through the prison system between 1972 and 1998 were sentenced for "scheduled" offences.[23]

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21 The Act contained a list, "Schedule 4", that drew together selected existing criminal legislation, from common law murder to "throwing or using petrol bombs", to define conflict-related offences.

22 *Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1973*, The General Public Acts, London: HMSO, 1974.

23 Corcoran 2006: 8.

The failure of reactive containment led to the strategy of criminalization. Criminalization was a penal rather than judicial policy. The sentencing process remained the same, while the conditions within the jails changed: on 1 March 1976, "special category" was withdrawn. From this moment, sentenced prisoners were subjected to a conventional or "normal" criminal regime, most forcefully materialized by the requirement to dress in prison clothing. Republican male prisoners refused to wear "a convict's uniform,"[24] wrapped themselves in prison blankets, and began a collective prison protest, involving female republican prisoners despite their different clothing regimes. Prisons became increasingly important front lines in the conflict as republican prisoners reasserted their political status through the blanket then no-wash campaigns that culminated in the hunger strikes of 1980-1981.[25]

Material conditions

The conditions of political imprisonment towards the end of the reactive containment phase of the conflict enabled the production of the Armagh handkerchief along with many others. Prisoners "on special category" sustained their own organizations within jails, such as "A" company formed in 1974. They took collective control over the shared spaces of the wing, dining room, association area or yard. Creating commemorative objects by decorating handkerchiefs, for example, was one of a series of collective political practices or traditions of resistance. Much more widely commented upon was prisoners' participation in military drills and education programmes. Interned, remanded and special category prisoners were not required to work, and thus could spend their time participating in activities that allowed them to maintain their political collectives, protecting themselves from the penal regime whilst they remained in the prison.

Thus the Armagh handkerchief is a record of political imprisonment within the British state. At the moment when the

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24 Francie Brolly popularized the phrase "convict's uniform" in the H Block song, 1976.

25 McKeown 2001; Corcoran 2006: 33-41; Shirlow & McEvoy 2008: 28-30.

handkerchief was produced, the forty-five female prisoners who signed their names on its fabric were among the special category political prisoners. The date of their collective imprisonment, 1976, occurs twice on the Armagh handkerchief; its numbers marked out in felt tip on the banner and written in Biro pen along the bottom hem. Decorated in the year special category was withdrawn and political status de-recognized within the prison system, it records the continuity of prisoners' political identity. Similarly to Jane Terrero's Holloway handkerchief, the Armagh piece of cloth asserts the importance of a moment in time. The handkerchiefs are announcements that their date, 1912 or 1976, is worthy of note, of historical and, therefore, political significance.

The use of handkerchiefs as celebratory historical records was already well established before the twentieth century; it developed with the technologies of printing on textiles. Braun-Ronsdorf's *History of the Handkerchief*, presents examples of decorated handkerchiefs dating from the late seventeenth century that carry the stamp of political history: peace treaties, Parliamentary Acts; military, religious and royal leaders; maps and engineering achievements.[26] Widely reported on in broadsheets and periodicals, on paper that carried the immediacy of news, their imprint on cloth, for elite exchange of gifts or the souvenir trade, conveyed greater permanence. These handkerchiefs became a public national record through their incorporation into cloth. The Holloway handkerchief could be considered an appropriation of an official act of commemoration and the Armagh piece a reactivation of a subversive practice. Understood in this way, both perform a particularly powerful manoeuvre; taking a sanctioned form and using it for an unsanctioned activity is simultaneously a recognition and rejection of authority.

Borrowed form

Decorating a handkerchief begins with deciding on its centrepiece. Republican prisoners drew upon the conventional, recognizable iconography of nation and religion: Celtic interlacing and crosses,

[26] Braun-Ronsdorf 1967.

maps of Ireland and Irish flags dominated their handkerchiefs. The gun, metonym for affiliation to an army, is recurrent as is the emblem of incarceration, barbed wire (fig. 5). The Armagh handkerchief with its tricolour overlaid with an AK47 is a typical cloth of its type. Its centrepiece adapted popular iconography using the limited materials available within a jail.

Prisoners with drawing skills produced stencils using greaseproof paper taken from prison kitchens or dining rooms. The stencil was laid under a handkerchief pinned or stretched on a board or table to guide the maker's hand over a smooth, taut surface. Skilled handkerchief makers might create the centrepiece outlines for other prisoners, share their stencils or reserve them for their own handkerchiefs. Colour was added to its surface, staining the whole; the flattening effect of even blocks of colour were offset a little by the depth of the perspectival shapes in the centrepiece design. The felt tip pens that created colour were widely shared. One former prisoner recalls the constant demand for all shades of green, the national colour of Ireland, and its frequent unavailability as the supply of pens, dependent upon donations of family or friends, was limited in jail. All handkerchiefs presented imagery with writing. Mottos might be copied from a stencil, but names and dedications were done freehand and concluded the decoration of the handkerchief.[27] Handkerchief decoration flourished in all the jails that held remanded, interned or sentenced political prisoners: in Armagh, Crumlin Road, Magilligan, Portlaoise, and especially Long Kesh. Kris Brown, author of the extensive *Artefacts Audit: a report on the material culture of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland* notes that "material relating to the prison experience is abundant."[28]

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27 This account is based on discussions with republican handkerchief makers at the museum housed by the Roddy McCorley Society where the Armagh handkerchief is held.

28 Brown 2008: 28. Handkerchiefs appear in every British and Irish collection that attempts to record the experience of imprisonment during "The Troubles": national museums, British Army regimental or Northern Ireland Prison Service collections, republican or loyalist exhibitions. They are also regularly auctioned on eBay, see Purbrick 2013.

In its use of iconography, methods of creating colour, and formal organization of word and image, there is nothing to distinguish the Armagh handkerchief from any of those made by republican men in Long Kesh, the largest jail for male prisoners. Why, then, is this handkerchief so easily recognized as a gendered object? Does its gender only rest upon the female names, the signatures of women? I would suggest that the Armagh handkerchief cannot be reduced to a mere reproduction of a male practice, not least because the coloured not stitched, written not embroidered, handkerchief is an appropriation of a female form. Interpretations of the Holloway handkerchief as an act of subversion or a performance of identity are premised, quite rightly, on the fact that textile production, particularly its finishing and decorative practices, is traditionally women's work.[29] When imprisoned republican men adapted available patterns of resistance over the twentieth century, they borrowed a subversive stitch.[30] Thus when the forty-five women signed the decorated Armagh handkerchief, they incorporated themselves into a republican tradition of resistance, borrowing the already borrowed stencilled replacement for the stitching practice. Borrowing is, of course, the practice of both tradition and resistance.

Handkerchiefs produced by both imprisoned men and women reflected changes in domestic decorative practices. By the last quarter of twentieth century, women no longer regularly practised the highly specialized techniques of embroidery, and so this traditional and exclusively female domestic pursuit was supplanted by a contemporary, less skilled, domestic occupation performed by children: filling outlined shapes with colour from felt-tip pens. Jailed women may have

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29 Parker 2012; Daly Goggin 2009.

30 One republican handkerchief held by National Museum of Ireland (http://www.museum.ie/en/list/the-collections-1.aspx) closely reproduces forms found in the Holloway handkerchief, including attaching a commemorative postcard. "In Memory of T. Darcy and J. McNeela/16th 19th April 1940", uses embroidery threads to create blocks of colour for its emblems, the Irish flag and harp, but these are laid over the fabric, drawn by a needle but not in any recognizable or taught embroidery stitch. This handkerchief may help understand how male prisoners adapted the feminine practice of stitching before developing colouring or staining techniques with felt tip pens.

developed some stitching skills thanks to needlecraft and dress-making training offered to female prisoners in Armagh jail,[31] but such skills were not transferred to handkerchief decoration. That they stencilled rather than stitched demonstrates that they sought to reproduce a recognisable male republican form, a shared iconography rendered through the same decorative technique.

A simple piece of cloth

Whilst the decorative strategies deployed on the surface of handkerchief changed, the handkerchief did not. A square of fabric accorded a commemorative capacity, it remains consistent. Close attention must be paid to the materiality of this piece of cloth. In the introduction to their edited collection of ethnographic essays, *Cloth and the Human Experience* (1989), Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider consider cloth as both a symbol and medium for social life. It serves to consolidate social relations and can at times mobilize political power. This highly significant social and political material is also gendered. Schneider and Weiner claim that "cloth is more closely associated with women than with men."[32] Beyond the crude strategies of gender differentiation in the commodified handkerchief (large for men or small for women, straight, hard masculine hems or frilly, fragile feminine edges) there exist lasting historical relationships between women and cloth. Weiner recognizes that "[w]omen are by no means universally the producers of cloth" but, she explains, "their important roles in these activities are found worldwide as is the symbolism of human and cultural reproduction that is associated with cloth and its reproduction."[33] Women make, and represent the making, of material worlds, from the particular to the universal, the familial to the political or cosmological. "[C]loth", she and Schneider

31 Corcoran 2006: 25. Although male prisoners used the prison workshop and its craft practices, such as woodwork, to create republican artefacts such as harps, needlework was not adapted by female prisoners in the same way.

32 Weiner & Schneider 1989: 20.

33 Weiner 1992: 47.

sum up, "evokes female power."[34] Women also control its circulation: in many societies they monopolize all or most of the manufacturing sequence, giving them a larger role than men. Many societies also assign women, rather than men, to exchange or give the cloths that "tie the living to the dead, the bride's to the groom's family, the politically dominant to their dependent clients".[35]

Cloth is also personal, covering and binding, shielding and showing. Handkerchiefs, which are held in the space between different material domains, manifest an interior life to an exterior world. They mediate the physical and moral, the private and public, the personal and political. The feelings, desires or needs of a person are carried, and rather carefully kept in a handkerchief: it can show civility, demonstrate love or grief; it can ask for sympathy.[36] Patrolling the surfaces of appearance, it also has a capacity for secrecy, it removes dirt and wipes away the body's excretions onto its surface. It is on hand to ensure that "matter out of place"[37] is moved.

For Schneider and Weiner cloth performs the same material and symbolic work of reproduction. Cloth is used by women to remember ancestors, to make alliances, to continue familial and political lines. Here reproduction is best understood as the preservation of life: maintaining social relationships over time. Importantly, the gendering of material that can envelop the human form does not fix its meaning. Rather, it casts it as a highly charged symbolic site. Through cloth exchanges, often enacted by women, material is inherited; it is passed on. Once an object acquires the status of inheritance, other kinds of significance proliferate.[38] Since cloth passes between the dead and living, past and present, it can carry the marks of time. Indeed, the prison handkerchiefs are a record of time.

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34 Weiner & Schneider 1989: 21.

35 Weiner & Schneider 1989: 3.

36 For the most important instance of a white handkerchief in the conflict used to appeal for sympathy see Dawson 2010.

37 Douglas 1966.

38 Weiner 1992: 3.

Of the person

Neither the Armagh nor the Holloway handkerchiefs are distant acts of commemoration. Their dates, reproduced on the handkerchiefs, mark gatherings of groups of imprisoned women. The decoration of both brought together a group of women and turned a moment of time into one of significance. Their signatures, written and stitched, are an expression of their existence, there and then, with each other and within their jails. The production and preservation of the handkerchiefs are acts of holding on to the time of their gathering, which keeps that moment from falling away into the past. The handkerchiefs halt time.

The Armagh and Holloway handkerchiefs are also a record of individual participation in a collective. Active participation is demonstrated by women's signing and stitching their names, making their own interventions upon the cloth. The handkerchiefs are a testament to their individual and collective existences, a form of personification. Imprisonment is inevitably personal and de-personalizing. In Armagh, for example, an imprisoned woman was removed from the place where she was known and from the people who recognized her. The names and places written on the Armagh handkerchief offer a glimpse of personhood behind the statistics of imprisonment.

The line of writing along the bottom hem announces that it was Christine's; it was hers to give to Geordie and Bernadette. Christine would have gathered the signatures to create a souvenir of her time in prison to donate to her friends, family or supporters. The women who signed their names wrote them for her; they did so to help her mark the occasion of her imprisonment and to claim their place within the group of imprisoned women. Below their names, the signatories provide a small sketch of their lives: "Evelyn Brady A/Town 8 years", "Marie McCann, Falls Rd, 7yrs", "Philomena Lyttle, Derry, 8 years." The juxtaposition of sentence and locality connects time and place as destinations on a journey and suggests locality may explain the sentence. Eight years for coming from Andersontown, the same time for living in Derry. These place names are catholic-nationalist areas and front lines in conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

As the women prisoners summarized their lives and signed their names for Christine, they identified themselves as members of the 'A' Company announced in black lettering along the banner. 'A' company was the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (IRA's) organization within Armagh jail. The gathering of names that commemorated the occasion of the women's imprisonment was also a political declaration. More than this, it was an act of defiance. Of the female prisoners serving conflict-related sentences, 17%, according to Mary Corcoran's figures, were jailed for "public order offences or membership of proscribed organizations as their main or sole conviction."[39] Perhaps nine women who named themselves members of the IRA on the handkerchief decorated in Armagh jail were imprisoned for this very same "scheduled" offence: IRA membership. Moreover, most, if not all of the conflict-related offences of 'A' Company would have been undertaken as members of the IRA or as part of the IRA's military campaign. The handkerchief, therefore, is an article of opposition to imprisonment, a rejection of the power of prison over a person.

The unapologetic adherence to violent political struggle does not quite overwhelm the feminine form of the handkerchief. Its contradictions pivot around its personal expression of political allegiance. Nor is this just a matter of inscription, altering the surface of the cloth without changing the material. Allegiance to the IRA is personalized through the handkerchief itself, because it was a gift. Christine gave it to Geordie and Bernadette. All gifts may be considered personal objects to some extent: as they pass from the hand of one to that of another they acknowledge those persons and their relationship to each other.[40] The Armagh handkerchief anticipates its recipients, Geordie and Bernadette. The time taken to create its centrepiece, to decorate it, to pass it between female prisoners for signing was devoted to them.

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39 Corcoran 2006: 8.

40 Mauss 1990.

Tying up

The conditions of political imprisonment help explain both the circulation of decorated handkerchiefs and their production. The greater numbers of visits and parcels received by prisoners with political status facilitated the exchange of objects, both permitted and proscribed, between prisoners, their family and supporters. Plain handkerchiefs were given to prisoners, because they were considered an essential component of dress. Thus, the particular properties of the handkerchief ensured that it passed through the prison system. But its capacity for secrecy suggests other uses.

While plain handkerchiefs were part of dress, decorated ones were not. The process of drawing, outlining, colouring and writing transformed a permitted object into a proscribed one. Irish tricolours could be banned under the Flags and Emblems (Display) Act (Northern Ireland) 1954, and guns declared membership within proscribed organizations. Once decorated, handkerchiefs were smuggled out of the prisons. The handkerchief's material properties, its light folding fabric facilitated these illicit transfers of the early 1970s, while special category conditions prevailed. Indeed, its ability to be smuggled determined, at least in part, its suitability to be decorated. The handkerchief was difficult to detect in a pat down search, especially if wound along the thicker turns of fabric typical of trouser waistbands. Furthermore, at a time when political imprisonment was officially acknowledged, prison officers did not seek confrontations over prison traffic in commemorative objects.

Creases are still visible on the Armagh handkerchief. It was folded four times to be carried by a person at a sixteenth of its full size. Smuggled handkerchiefs, such as the Armagh piece, then performed the work of gifts: they sustained prisoners' family relationships, tied people together despite the separation of imprisonment, and contributed to their family economy.[41] They were passed to family members on special occasions, in much the same way as the presentation of printed cards mark important moments in lives of their recipients. Upon receipt, they were often displayed and framed

[41] Komter 1996.

in the prisoner's family homes. Framed and unframed handkerchiefs were also auctioned to raise money for these families. Thus they contributed to a family economy and sustained relationships.

Because a handkerchief mediates between body and world, it can bind people together. It conducts, as Schneider and Weiner have argued, the material and symbolic work of reproducing life, from protecting and presenting the body and the self to sheltering and sustaining communities and culture. It functions as a representation of the capacity of cloth. The meaning of handkerchiefs decorated by imprisoned men or imprisoned women are differently weighted, the attributes of gender loaded into male or female names, tempering the understanding of the politicization of a personal thing. Decoration does not overturn the association of women with cloth. Thus the handkerchiefs remain contradictory. It is the Armagh handkerchief decorated by women that reveals the contractions of fragile and forceful cloth. It does not resolve them. Indeed, it is in these contradictions that meaning is continually reproduced.

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